

Planners Discuss Decision

Council Tabled Request Commission Denied

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HARRISONBURG — Last Wednesday, the Planning Commission discussed City Council's decision to table an issue the commission had unanimously voted to deny.

City Council voted 5-0 July 11 to table a request to rezone property around Purcell Park to give the property owner and concerned neighbors another chance to reach a compromise.

Mayor Deanna Reed and council members Richard Baugh, Ted Byrd, George Hirschmann and Chris Jones voted for a delay on the matter until Aug. 22.

However, the council seemed ready to vote favorably on the issue after Byrd made a motion to approve, with a second by Hirschmann and Jones speaking in support of the project.

Jones later amended Byrd's motion to table the issue, which all council members approved.

Public Input

Giles Stone, the owner of the property fronting South Main Street, East Weaver Avenue and Edgelawn Drive, requested the parcels be rezoned from professional and low-density residential to high-density zoning. If approved, Stone told City Council, he is considering replacing at least two dilapidated single-family homes with a mixed-use complex with restaurants, retail space and up to 22 one-bedroom apartments. Stone says the homes are beyond repair.

"I'm not here to make a profit off of the people of the Purcell Park neighborhood," he said at the council meeting, "I'm just trying to figure out something to do with the property that would be complementary to the city and would look nice."

Dozens of residents in the area attended the council meeting to oppose the request, with 11 speaking against the measure. They claim creating more retail space will destroy the integrity of their neighborhood.

“I ask the City Council, why would you be willing to show this favoritism to Mr. Stone?” said Joseph Brown, a 13- year resident of 36 E. Weaver Ave., at the council meeting. “Why would we be willing to change the zoning on these small parcels of land to the benefit of Mr. Stone but the detriment of our whole neighborhood?”

Planners’ Perspective

In May, the planners voted unanimously to deny Stone’s request. Baugh, who serves on the planning commission, said his vote was swayed because of the opposition to the project from the neighbors.

He voted to table the request because his motion to deny it outright failed when it didn’t get a second.

“If you were to press me as to why four of my colleagues were not anxious to follow the recommendation of this body, I don’t know that I’ve got a whole lot of insight into it,” Baugh said to the Planning Commission the next day. He also said council’s more favorable take on the issue may have been influenced by the environment of that public hearing. While the planners heard two hours of mostly negative comment before ruling unanimously against the request, the atmosphere at the council’s public hearing before the vote on July 11 was more amicable. A group of eight, including Stone and neighborhood residents, met twice in the weeks between the commission and council meetings, which may have lessened tensions but did not end in compromise.

While the two boards seem to disagree on the request, the commission’s unanimous vote to deny the proposal also went against advice from city staff. Adam Fletcher, director of planning and community development, gave a 30- minute presentation to council explaining the complexities of the situation and recommended approval.

He also addressed the Planning Commission Wednesday about community concerns over whether the potential rezoning would be adequate to protect the residential areas from busier roads. The city is recommending many more areas be zoned as mixed- use spaces, he said, that already serve as buffer spaces between single- family homes and traffic. On East Market Street from downtown to Interstate 81, nonresidential uses front the main drag, he said. “So, when you think about it in that context, what is the difference in having apartments above the nonresidential use?” he said. Baugh said his main reason for moving to deny the requests was because of the precedent the rezoning could set if property owners with mixed- use areas are able to fold in neighboring low- density, single- family parcels as well.

If the council votes to approve the requests, he said, the planning commission could see an increase in similar proposals from property owners with land fronting busy roads.

But it is not entirely uncommon for the two governing bodies to disagree. In March, the council unanimously denied a special- use permit for a house on Old South High Street, where five unrelated people were living, which exceeded the number allowed in the area.

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